The Light of the World

Preface

Before I begin, I want to be clear about what this brief essay is—and what it is not.

What follows should not be read as a continuation of my previous analytical essays on the current American moment. In those writings, I have deliberately drawn on pagan, secular, and inter-faith sources to construct a perennial moral argument suitable for a pluralistic society. That work remains necessary. It speaks across differences and rests on shared human reason. Yet any careful reader will have recognized that its moral grammar is ultimately shaped by Catholic social teaching.

This essay is different. What follows is witness testimony. It is written from within the present moment, under its pressures, and after the collapse of many illusions about institutional stability, procedural safeguards, and moral self-correction. It consists of direct observation, lived experience, and the ethical conclusions that remained when fear, ambiguity, and coercion were no longer theoretical.

I do not write here as a theologian, nor as a pastor, nor as a partisan advocate. I write as a witness in the classical sense: one who has seen, endured, and remained attentive. This is not an argument meant to persuade skeptics, nor a theory that claims to explain events in totality. It is a restrained record of what proved true when systems failed and psychological pressure reached its peak. I offer it primarily to my brothers and sisters in Christ—not to alarm, but to orient and to clarify conscience.

I also offer it as an invitation to collaboration with others who labor with words: writers, journalists, scholars, clergy, and laypeople whose vocation is truth-telling rather than power-seeking. We are entering a period in which clarity, restraint, and moral discipline will matter more than volume or outrage. Those who can still see clearly owe one another recognition and quiet solidarity.

My relationship to the Church is not recent, reactive, or opportunistic. I was baptized at birth and educated in Catholic institutions. I studied Latin as a teenager under a Catholic biblical scholar. Long before I had language for it, my moral imagination was formed by Augustine and Aquinas, and later by witnesses such as Václav Benda and George Ratterman—figures who understood that truth is not an abstraction but a lived obligation, often borne at personal cost. Catholicism was not something I discovered late in life; it is the intellectual and moral atmosphere in which I learned to think, judge, and accept responsibility.

I write this essay in that spirit, and with hope—not optimism, not denial, but hope grounded in the knowledge that truth survives even when it must pass through exile, silence, or suffering. If these words help you orient yourself, steady your conscience, or

recognize others who are quietly doing the same, then they will have served their purpose.

I must note that as a young person, I did what many serious minds do. I tested the boundaries. I flirted with mysticism as a teenager, searching for transcendence without discipline. As a young man, I explored Marxism, drawn by its moral outrage at injustice and its insistence that history has consequences. I passed through existentialism, grappling with freedom, responsibility, and the weight of choice. More recently, I spent time with Dr. Carl Jung and the symbolic language of the unconscious, which offered insight into the psyche but ultimately gestured toward a metaphysics it could not sustain.

Reaffirming my faith was not a turn of events. It was not a reversal, nor a dramatic conversion. It was a reminder and recognition of what I had already known, but had bracketed in secular terminology. The categories that endured—natural law, moral realism, conscience, grace—were not imported from elsewhere. They were already there, waiting to be acknowledged again once the substitutes exhausted themselves.

For many years, I worked deliberately at the level of public reason. I believed—correctly—that in a fractured society, moral truths must often be articulated in a language accessible to all: through history, philosophy, law, and shared human experience. That work remains necessary. But it is incomplete. There is a point beyond which abstraction no longer sustains the human soul, and beyond which truth cannot be carried by concepts alone. I reached that point not by choice, but by force of circumstance.

I have lived long enough inside institutional breakdown to know the difference between error and deception. I have seen what happens when systems meant to protect the vulnerable instead turn inward, prioritizing reputation, procedure, and power over truth. I have experienced the peculiar loneliness that follows when one discovers that formal authority, stripped of moral courage, becomes not merely useless but actively harmful. None of this made me special. It made me ordinary, in fact. In the year 2026, in the United States of America, these conditions are no longer rare.

What surprised me was not the darkness itself. History prepared me for that. What surprised me was how thin the substitutes proved to be when pressure intensified. Ideology fractured. Psychology explained, but did not anchor. Analysis illuminated patterns but did not still fear. Even discipline and self-mastery—valuable as they are—could not supply meaning when meaning itself was under threat. I do not reject these tools. I simply testify that they were insufficient.

There came a moment—quiet, unannounced—when the question ceased to be *what do I think is true?* and became *how must I know live truthfully?* From this simple line of questioning, fear lost its persuasive power. Moral clarity returned without negotiation. Certain lines could no longer be crossed, regardless of consequence. Truth asserted itself not as an idea, but as an obligation.

This is what I mean by light. It is not certainty in the modern sense. Light, as I encountered it, was the restoration of moral realism—the re-establishment of a world in which good and evil are not theoretical categories but lived realities, binding on the person regardless of cost, but not coequal forces in the ontological sense. It was the end of dissociation. The end of rationalization. The end of pretending that survival alone is a sufficient good.

Only later did I understand that what I had encountered was not novel at all. It was older than every system that has failed Western civilization. It did not require reinterpretation or innovation. It required assent. The Church did not suddenly become useful to me because it offered protection or identity. It became unavoidable because it named, without ambiguity, what conscience already knew: that truth is not created by power, that suffering does not nullify moral law, and that the human person is not permitted to redefine good in order to endure evil.

What I claim here is obedience—imperfect, faltering, but also real. I claim that when all external authorities proved unreliable, the structure of Catholic moral teaching did not bend to circumstance, did not flatter fear, and did not dissolve under pressure. It stood, as it always has, indifferent to preferences and uncompromising in its demands. That, in the end, is what saved me from confusion.

I offer this testimony now because we are entering a period in which many will be tempted—subtly, politely, and with good intentions—to loosen first principles for the sake of safety, unity, or survival. Catholics should recognize this temptation for what it is. It is not newl; it is perennial, and it has never ended well.

I write this so that when the noise increases, and when fear presents itself as prudence, some small record remains that the light was visible, the lines were clear, and conscience was not abandoned. Light does not argue. It endures.

Before God and in conscience,

Bradley Scott Blankenship

I. Testimony: The Reality of Natural Law

What I assert at the outset is simple, and I offer it without flourish: truth endured scrutiny; conscience survived terror; light did not require permission.

I did not arrive at this conviction through sentiment, nor through comfort. I arrived at it as one arrives at a clearing after a long passage through forest and storm—having lost what was unnecessary, carrying only what could not be surrendered. It was formed under conditions that tested every assumption I had about authority, protection, and the reliability of human institutions. For much of my life, fear was normalized, silence was enforced, and power was rarely accountable. Later, as an adult, I encountered the same pattern at a civic and institutional scale: systems that spoke the language of legitimacy while quietly demanding compliance, even when compliance required the distortion or suppression of truth.

I am not unique in this. What distinguishes my experience is not its extremity, but its continuity. From early childhood onward, I learned—first without words, and later with painful clarity—that speaking truth carried costs, and that appealing to authority did not guarantee protection. Over time, this produced a certain sobriety of vision. When one cannot rely on the external enforcement of the good, one is forced inward, toward a more fundamental question: what, if anything, binds when fear intensifies, and consequences become real?

For many years, I answered that question provisionally. I relied on reason, discipline, and analysis. I studied history and law, psychology, and political theory. I believed that if one understood systems deeply enough, one could move through them without surrendering moral integrity. To a degree, this is true. Knowledge matters. Prudence matters. But I discovered—slowly, and then all at once—that these tools presuppose something they cannot themselves generate: an account of the good that remains binding even when it is inconvenient, isolating, or dangerous.

There were moments when the pressure sharpened—when the choice was no longer between competing interpretations, but between truth and expedience; between naming what was real and retreating into ambiguity for the sake of safety. In those moments, fear revealed its true voice. It does not thunder at first. It reasons. It presents itself as realism, clothing compromise in the language of maturity. It asks, almost gently, whether this one exception might be justified.

What prevented that slide was not insight, nor resilience, nor courage, as it is commonly praised. It was conscience—formed long before I could articulate it, shaped by a moral grammar I had absorbed as a child and never fully lost. That conscience did not

negotiate; it simply stood, like bedrock beneath a river, unmoved by the current. Certain acts were impermissible, regardless of outcome.

My battle with fear had one decisive turn. I recall sitting in a park in Cincinnati, Ohio, in the year 2024. It was an ordinary afternoon, unremarkable in its outward features, the kind of day that carries no sign of importance until one looks back upon it. I had been restless, burdened by the weight of what I was beginning to see, and uncertain how far I was being asked to go. I felt an interior prompting—a clear and steady insistence—to sit down, to be still, and to wait. The sense was simple: remain here; attend; be receptive.

I understood this as an act of obedience, not curiosity. I sat, surrounded by the ordinary life of the city—trees overhead, footsteps on gravel, distant traffic passing like a river whose course one does not control. After some time, a man approached me. He told me he recognized me as a Christian. There was nothing extraordinary in his manner, nothing urgent or dramatic. We spoke plainly, as strangers sometimes do when they sense a shared ground beneath the surface.

We spoke of Jesus Christ and His teachings. I told him, briefly and without embellishment, about my situation—about the fear I felt as I began to uncover evidence of serious criminal activity, about the sense that once I proceeded, there would be no clean way back. I spoke honestly about my apprehension, about the cost that might come with telling the truth.

He listened. Then he said, simply: *You need to follow the voice of faith, not the voice of fear*.

In that moment, I understood exactly what he meant. Fear had been speaking to me in the language of prudence, caution, and self-preservation. Faith did not counter with promises of safety. It did not deny the danger. It simply clarified the order of things. But fear was not to be obeyed.

The choice was made there, though the work had not yet begun. I was still afraid, but fear no longer governed. What followed was not courage in the heroic sense, but consent. I understood that I had been given what was required: education, training, discipline, and a vocation oriented toward truth. The task was not to manufacture certainty, but to proceed faithfully.

I began to attend church again with this man. Within that Christian community, there was a quiet awareness that the ground was shifting. Nothing was announced. No prophecy was declared. But there was a shared sense that we were being asked to stand—to remain lucid, grounded, and faithful—as pressures mounted. That we were called, in our small and uncelebrated ways, to be the light of the world. To be a barrier—not of force, but of truth—between civilization and its own unraveling.

Only later did I understand what had occurred within me. I had not constructed a moral position in the moment; I had returned to one already present. What endured was not a synthesis of secular philosophies, nor a private ethic assembled from experience, but a structure that predated me and did not depend on my approval. Natural law asserted itself not as a theory but as a reality. Moral truth was not something I invented; it was something I recognized again, as one recognizes a landscape long known but briefly obscured.

In this, my experience mirrored that of Saint Augustine more closely than I realized at the time. In the *Confessions*, he does not describe conversion as discovery so much as remembrance, not as the acquisition of truth but as its recovery. *Late have I loved you*, he writes—late, not because the truth arrived late, but because he himself had arrived late to what had always been there. *You were within, and I was outside,* he confesses, acknowledging that his long wandering through ideas, ambitions, and systems was not a search for something absent, but an evasion of something already present.

So it was with me. I had ranged widely, as I have noted—through history, politics, psychology, and philosophy—believing that if I mapped the world carefully enough, moral clarity would emerge on its own. Much of what I learned was true, or at least partially so. But none of it could bind when binding became costly. None of it could command the will when fear pressed hardest. When that moment came, what asserted itself was not theory but recognition. Natural law did not present itself as an argument to be weighed; it asserted itself as reality, as something already known and no longer negotiable.

This recognition carried with it a certain humility. It stripped away any illusion of authorship. I was not the architect of the good I now stood within. I was its beneficiary. I had been given grace. In that recognition came a quiet relief: that the burden of sustaining truth did not rest on my ingenuity or strength, but on reality itself—created, ordered, and faithful, whether I acknowledged it or not.

In this sense, my return was not a retreat into certainty, but a surrender to what had always already claimed me. Augustine names this surrender not as defeat, but as freedom—the freedom of finally consenting to *what is*. It was only from within that consent that fear lost its authority, and conscience found its voice again.

Saint Paul speaks of this same reality with a severity that modern ears often resist. He reminds us that *no one is free* in the way the world imagines freedom. Every person, he insists, is a servant—bound either to sin or to righteousness, either to death or to life. The question is never whether one will serve, but *whom*. To imagine oneself unbound, autonomous, answerable to nothing, is not liberation. It is simply another form of bondage, disguised as independence.

Paul's claim is bracing precisely because it strips away sentiment. There is no neutrality. There is no standing apart. One is always already under a law—either the law of appetite, fear, power, and self-preservation, or the law of God, which orders the soul toward truth. Paradoxically, it is only in submitting to natural law that one becomes free. *When you were slaves of sin, you were free from righteousness*, Paul writes; but that freedom proved empty, yielding only shame and death. *Now, having been set free from sin and enslaved to God*, he continues, *the fruit you get leads to sanctification, and its end, eternal life.*

This was not an abstract teaching to me. I recognized it in myself. I saw that what I had called freedom—the ability to delay, to hedge, to remain ambiguous, to keep options open—was, in fact, servitude to fear. Fear dictated what could be said, how far inquiry could go, and which truths were tolerable. To continue along that path would not have preserved my autonomy; it would have surrendered it entirely.

To submit to the law of God, by contrast, did not narrow my freedom. It clarified it. It relieved me of the burden of perpetual calculation. Once the order was restored—once obedience replaced negotiation—fear lost its authority. I did not become less human by serving the truth; I became more so.

This is the freedom the Church has always proclaimed, and the world has always misunderstood. Not the freedom to invent oneself endlessly, but the freedom to stand within reality without fracture. Not the freedom of limitless choice, but the freedom of rightful belonging. The freedom *to simply be who you are*. Augustine and Paul meet here, across centuries, in the same hard and luminous insight: that the soul is never most itself when it is unbound, but when it is rightly bound—to God, to the truth.

II. The Necessity of Faith

I recall a series of conversations with other Christians I had several years ago, often unplanned and unremarkable in their setting, yet weighty in their substance. We spoke about the history of the Church—about persecution not as an abstraction, but as a recurring condition of fidelity. We spoke of catacombs and councils, of martyrs and confessors, of centuries in which the Church endured not because it was powerful, but because it was true.

In one such conversation, I asked a friend what he believed to be the highest calling in life. He answered without hesitation: *to believe in something, and to be willing to die for it*. He was not speaking recklessly, nor in the modern language of extremism. He was speaking in the classical sense of *martyria*—witness. To stand so thoroughly in truth that one does not fold when the cost becomes absolute.

Something in this struck me with unusual force. We spoke quietly about how such a demand might return in our own time—not necessarily in spectacular forms, but through pressure, exclusion, misrepresentation, and the steady demand to soften what ought not be softened. As we spoke, I felt the weight of it settle in me, and I was overcome with emotion. I believe now that the Lord was preparing me—steadying me—for what was soon to follow.

Our conversations turned, as they often did, to Scripture. We spoke about the Greek in the Gospel of John, particularly the language of the Last Supper, and how carefully the Evangelist insists on the concreteness of Christ. Jesus is not presented as a symbol or an abstraction. He is flesh and blood. The Word becomes flesh, not metaphor.

That distinction mattered to us because it cuts against a perennial temptation—to spiritualize courage into something unreal. The Church teaches, without ambiguity, that Jesus Christ is fully man and fully God. His fear was real. His anguish was real. His prayer in Gethsemane was not theater. Yet, He completed the mission entrusted to Him because obedience was greater than fear.

One of the most formative teachings a Catholic mentor shared with me many years ago was simple and exacting: *courage is not the absence of fear; it is fear that has said its prayers*. That line stayed with me and named something I already knew but had not yet articulated. Fear is part of the human condition and what matters is whether fear is allowed to govern.

We spoke, too, about reality—about its faithfulness. About the fact that truth does not dissolve simply because it is punished. If a man is silenced, imprisoned, or even killed for telling the truth, that does not make him incorrect. It does not retroactively falsify

what he bore witness to. On the contrary, it reveals the costliness of truth in a world that resists it. This is not a morbid fixation but the sober core of our tradition.

The martyrs did not die to prove themselves right. They died because truth does not ask permission from power. The Church remembers them not because they sought death, but because they refused to deny what was real. Their witness stands as a rebuke to every age tempted to confuse survival with fidelity.

These conversations did not radicalize me. They clarified me. They placed my own situation within a longer horizon—one measured not by comfort or success, but by faithfulness across time. They taught me that the question is never whether fear will come, but whether it will be obeyed.

When circumstances later stripped away the illusion of neutrality and forced a choice, I found myself bound by obligations I had not authored. This binding did not arise from consensus, nor from psychological need, nor from political identity. It came from a source that did not ask whether I was ready. It asked *only whether I would be faithful.*

What I was being taught in those conversations, and in those quiet months of preparation, was not unique to my circumstances. It was not even new. It was the rediscovery of a pattern as old as the Church itself: that when truth cannot be refuted, it is mocked; when conscience cannot be coerced, it is ridiculed; and when faith refuses to serve power, power first laughs before it punishes. Christianity learned this lesson early, and it learned it not in treatises, but in the texture of lived witness—etched into stone, whispered in prisons, passed hand to hand across generations.

One of the earliest records of this posture does not survive in Scripture or creed, but was scratched crudely into a wall near the Palatine Hill, close to the very center of imperial Rome. The marking is small, rough, almost childish in execution, as though its maker assumed it would not need to last. It depicts a man standing before a crucified figure—except the figure has the head of a donkey. Beneath it, in uneven Greek, someone carved a caption: *Alexamenos honors his god.*

It is a joke, the kind of mockery that does not argue because it assumes argument is unnecessary, that laughs because it believes the matter is already settled. Then, in a different hand, someone added a reply. It is not ornate. It is not clever. It does not answer the insult on its own terms. It simply states: *Alexamenos is faithful.*

That is all. There is no defense, no clarification of doctrine, no attempt to persuade the mocker or shame the empire. There is no anger, no counter-mockery, no escalation. There is only fidelity, named plainly, without adornment or apology.

Two thousand years later, the empire that laughed is gone. Its emperors are footnotes and museum exhibits, their power reduced to fragments behind glass. The authority behind the taunt has dissolved. Yet the reply remains, and the reply is the point.

The Roman world did not begin its persecution of Christians with mass violence. It began with laughter. Christians were called absurd, weak, irrational, and unmanly. A god who loses? A god who is executed? A god who refuses violence and submits to death? From a pagan logic of power, this was nonsense. Gods conquer. Gods dominate. Gods mirror the empire that worships them. Gods confirm the world as it already is. Christianity did not answer this logic with a rival ideology or a competing theory of domination. It answered with witness.

Alexamenos did not respond by clarifying doctrine. He did not say, "You misunderstand our metaphysics." He did not say, "History will vindicate us." He did not say, "You will see who wins in the end." He said only this: *I am faithful.*

This is how Christianity has always responded when power mocks truth—not with escalation, but with clarity; not with spectacle, but with alignment. Christianity does not escalate conflict; it stabilizes the moral field.

The New Testament is explicit about this posture, even if modern readers forget it. The Gospels show Christ refusing spectacle, refusing violence, refusing to trade truth for survival. The Acts of the Apostles record a movement that spreads not by conquest, but by testimony. The Epistles read less like manifestos and more like instructions for remaining human inside systems that have lost their bearings.

Paul does not tell Christians to seize Rome. Peter does not tell them to overthrow Caesar. John does not tell them to burn the empire down. They tell them to tell the truth, to refuse lies, to care for the vulnerable, and to endure mockery without becoming what mocks them.

Washington is not Rome—but the pattern is familiar. In Minneapolis, today, American citizens are being shot and killed by federal immigration agents in broad daylight. Competing narratives harden almost immediately. Federal authorities claim imminent threat. City leaders describe reckless escalation. Video circulates. Language radicalizes. Protesters gather. Armed agents flood neighborhoods. Communities already under strain feel targeted, surveilled, and treated as suspect.

Almost at once, the same reflex of empire appears: Mockery. They are the contemporary equivalent of Roman laughter—because they abandon discernment in the presence of power. They outsource conscience. They mistake institutional authority for moral resolution. They confuse uncertainty with innocence.

Christian witness does not mean declaring guilt without process. It does not mean rage. It does not mean revenge. It means refusing to lie when the truth is uncomfortable, and refusing to hide behind institutions when moral responsibility is clear. Alexamenos did not need to prove anything about Rome to remain faithful. He simply did not allow Rome to define reality.

Faithfulness is not triumph. It is alignment. This is where modern people often lose the thread. Faithfulness is not about winning cultural battles or demonstrating superiority. It is about remaining aligned with what is real. To say *Alexamenos is faithful* is to say that he knows whom he serves; that he will not deny it to avoid mockery; that he does not require power's approval to remain whole; and that he will not become cruel to survive.

Today, in the United States of America, we are being mocked again. That is not a failure. It is a sign of recognition. In times like ours, those who actually believe in human dignity should *expect* mockery. We should expect to be called naïve, sentimental, unrealistic, ideological, dangerous, or irrelevant. That is the oldest reaction power that has when confronted with fidelity it cannot co-opt.

What matters is how we reply—not louder rhetoric, not moral exhibitionism, not despair, but simply the ancient answer, scratched into the wall of history:

Faithful.

Faithful to truth when narratives fracture; faithful to conscience when institutions wobble; faithful to human dignity when fear is politicized—without spectacle, without violence, without lies.

The Church did not survive by being clever. It survived by being true. Rome mocked it. Absolute monarchies tried to control it. Totalitarian regimes tried to erase it. Modern technocracies try to domesticate it. None have succeeded—not because the Church always won, but because it refused to stop being itself.

Alexamenos did not know his reply would last two millennia. He was not trying to make history. He was simply refusing to abandon his alignment. That is all that is ever asked of any of us. If you feel unsettled by what is happening in the United States—by the violence, the gaslighting, the fear, the confusion—that is not a sign of your weakness. It is a sign that your moral senses are still intact. If you feel the same in your era, then I hope you will recognize my words here and know that you stand in a long lineage.

All that is required is this: say what happens; acknowledge what is; do not add lies in order to survive. Alexamenos understood that long before we did. Today, and always, we must follow his example.

In my own life, I have tried to live in this posture of fidelity. What I add here must be stated with care, because it will sound implausible to those who believe that power determines reality rather than answers to it. In the course of my work as a journalist, I uncovered and documented serious crimes and systemic failures—working alone, without institutional backing, and without access to privileged tools or protected channels. I did not begin this work expecting it to succeed. I proceeded simply by following facts where they led, refusing to falsify what I found, and declining to stop when the implications became inconvenient.

As this work progressed, it became clear that conclusions reached through disciplined inquiry and refusal to compromise were surfacing realities that well-resourced institutions had not acknowledged or addressed. Agencies with vast legal authority, jurisdictional reach, and technical capacity found themselves constrained by incentives, procedures, and institutional risk in ways that limited their ability to act or speak plainly.

The result was not a dramatic confrontation, but something quieter and more revealing: the loss of narrative coherence and the erosion of plausible deniability. In strategic terms, this is not triumph but exposure—the moment when truth outpaces the structures tasked with managing it.

I do not record this to humiliate institutions, nor to elevate myself. I record it as a fact with theological significance. The explanation is not personal superiority, ingenuity, or exceptional insight. It is that no human system, however sophisticated, can indefinitely suppress what is real. Institutions are bounded by authority, incentives, and fear. Truth is not.

I do not claim that I accomplished this work by my own strength. I say this with precision: I experienced the sustaining and ordering work of the Holy Spirit—not as private revelation, not as exemption from error, but as fidelity under pressure. Grace did not replace reason; it demanded more of it. Obedience to Christ did not bypass analysis; it required submission to reality without distortion. It was not *I* who prevailed over systems. It was that alignment with truth proved more durable than the structures that hesitated to name it.

I am not specially chosen. I became one of the elect on the day I was baptized into the Church and entered the Body of Christ. What occurred was not an exception, but participation. Grace did not replace reason; it ordered it. Facts still had to be verified, timelines reconstructed, testimony weighed, contradictions confronted. There were absolutely no shortcuts. The work was slow, exacting, and often solitary. It was stressful and extremely dangerous.

In my own life and work, this is where reality revealed its nature. I saw myself that truth coheres and lies fracture. When inquiry is honest, reality responds—not theatrically, not immediately, but consistently. Truth has structure. Like gravity, it cannot be negotiated with. One does not create this order; one submits to it.

But this submission to truth had consequences in my personal life. It cost me security, reputation, and ease. It would have been materially easier to stop, and this is precisely why I can testify to what sustained the work. Discipline alone is insufficient when the cost is prolonged. Intelligence alone cannot bear the weight of fear. What endured was obedience—not to *outcome*, but to *truth*.

In the terms of our Church, this is not extraordinary. Grace does not abolish nature; it perfects it. The Holy Spirit does not negate reason; it orders it toward its proper end. Truth can be found because truth exists. Reality is intelligible because it is created. Conscience binds because it answers to something real.

I testify for history that there is one true God; that Jesus is Christ, the Son of God, consubstantial with the Father; that the Holy Spirit is alive and at work within the Church and within those who subordinate their will to God; that the image of God lives in each human person; and that every empire which abandons natural law, regardless of its earthly power, places itself in contradiction with reality itself.

III. Catholic Social Teaching Today

The Church is not an interest group, and her social teaching is not a partisan program. She is older than modern states, older than the bureaucracies that now presume to define legitimacy, older than the managerial language in which violence is renamed as "security" and domination is renamed as "order." Because she is older, she remembers what modern powers forget: that authority is not self-justifying; that force is not final; that the human person is not a tool; and that law severed from moral truth becomes, sooner or later, a machine for the strong.

Catholic social teaching is often summarized as if it were a list—solidarity, subsidiarity, the common good, the dignity of the person. But in lived experience, it does not arrive as a list. It arrives as an interior refusal to participate in degradation, as an instinct to stand with the vulnerable when the vulnerable are being treated as disposable, as a disciplined suspicion toward every system that demands silence in exchange for safety. It arrives, in other words, as conscience under pressure.

What we are watching now, in the early weeks of 2026, is the return of conditions in which conscience will be tested not by hypothetical puzzles, but by orders, policies, and incentives that place ordinary people in morally abnormal positions. We see this most clearly, perhaps, in the military and security domains—those regions of civic life where obedience is praised as virtue and dissent is treated as a disease.

Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, the archbishop for US Military Services, has warned that troops may be placed under orders that conflict with conscience, and that it would be "morally acceptable" to disobey such orders, even while acknowledging how untenable such situations can be for individuals acting alone. That statement matters not because it is sensational, but because it is old. It is the Church remembering aloud what soldiers have always been tempted to forget: *that obedience to the state is not an absolute, and that the human person cannot be reduced to an instrument*.

This is where proportionality becomes more than a technical term. In the Catholic moral tradition, proportionality is not permission to do whatever one can justify after the fact; it is a constraint, a measure, a refusal of excess. It insists that even where force may be permitted, it must be restrained; even where defense may be legitimate, it must be ordered; even where coercion may be contemplated, it must be bounded by the dignity of those upon whom it falls. The Church does not deny that states have a duty to protect the innocent. But she insists—against every empire's instinct—that protection cannot be purchased by abandoning the moral law that makes protection meaningful in the first place.

Subsidiarity adds a second restraint, quieter but no less severe. It teaches that decisions should be made at the lowest competent level, close to the lives they will touch, so that persons are not swallowed by abstractions and communities are not treated as mere terrain. It is a principle that sounds administrative until one sees what happens when it is violated: people become numbers; neighborhoods become theater; human beings become processing units in a system designed to optimize outcomes rather than to honor persons. When power lifts itself high above the local, above the concrete, above the faces of those it governs, it becomes incapable of pity, and then, as a result, incapable of justice.

Solidarity completes the triad, not as sentiment, but as realism about the Body. It is the refusal to pretend that one's safety is separate from another's humiliation; it is the recognition that the wounds inflicted on the margins do not remain on the margins. Solidarity is not merely being nice. It is the moral intelligence that when the weak are treated as expendable, the strong are training themselves to become wolves, and wolves do not stop at the edge of the pasture.

If you want to see these principles embodied rather than defined, you could look to Greenland. A recent report from the *National Catholic Reporter* described a Catholic community of roughly three hundred people in Nuuk—many of them immigrants—watching renewed international talk about annexation and power with a quiet, wary attention.

Their priest, Fr. Tomaž Majcen, spoke of the disorienting experience of hearing one's home discussed "far away," as if it were a bargaining chip rather than a place where children are raised, and the dead are buried. Their bishop in Copenhagen wrote to them, acknowledging that "peace and stability are at stake," urging faith and trust in God's providence amid volatility. Majcen, in one of those lines that land like a small stone in the conscience, described the character of faith in that Arctic place as "humble and steady," like a light held against a long night.

There is something profoundly Catholic about that image, and profoundly relevant to our moment. Faith is not always a banner. Sometimes it is a lamp. Sometimes it is simply the choice to remain human when the world is pressuring people into becoming instruments—into becoming frightened cogs, loyal functionaries, and useful mouthpieces.

Now turn from the Arctic to the American Midwest, where the language of "operations" has returned to the streets, and where the old collision between conscience and coercion is no longer theoretical. In Minnesota, in January 2026, the killing of Reneé Good—a suburban American mother shot by an ICE officer—became a flashpoint in a wave of protests and a broader "ICE OUT!" day of action.

Thousands protested in bitter cold, businesses shuttered in solidarity, and dozens of clergy were among those arrested after kneeling in prayer at the Minneapolis–Saint Paul International Airport. Other reporting similarly described large demonstrations, a posture of nonviolent witness, and clergy arrests amid a rising sense among many residents that federal power had become a kind of occupation rather than a service. That would be proven true after the open daylight slaying of Alex Pretti by a Customs and Border Patrol agent.

Meanwhile, an Episcopal bishop in New Hampshire, Rob Hirschfeld, recently told clergy to prepare for "a new era of martyrdom," even urging them to have their wills in order—language meant not to glorify death, but to sober the imagination and remind Christians that bodily witness, nonviolent but costly, has always been part of this faith's memory. Whether one agrees with every rhetorical choice in such a warning, the signal is unmistakable: we are living again in a climate where public speech is being tightened, where the vulnerable are being treated as suspects, and where religious leaders are being drawn, not toward abstraction, but toward concrete presence.

What does our social teaching say in such a moment? It says first: do not allow propaganda—whether official or unofficial—to dissolve your perception of the human person. The easiest way to make cruelty normal is to render its targets unreal: "illegals," "garbage," "invaders," "enemies," "threats." Once a human being is converted into a category, violence becomes administratively simple. Solidarity interrupts that conversion. Solidarity insists: this is *someone*. This is a mother. This is a worker. This is a child. This is an *image-bearer of our God*. This is not an object upon which the state may eject its anxiety.

It says second: insist on right order in the use of force. Proportionality is a refusal of the totalizing instinct—the instinct that treats every challenge as an occasion for escalation, every disagreement as a threat, every problem as an excuse for the expansion of coercion. A genuinely moral approach to public safety is not a theater of domination; it is a discipline of restraint. It must always ask: is this necessary, or merely possible? Is this protecting the innocent, or merely demonstrating power? Is this ordered toward peace, or merely ordered toward control?

It says third: keep decisions close to life. Subsidiarity is not an escape from moral responsibility; it is a way of preventing moral responsibility from being swallowed by bureaucratic distance. When authority becomes too centralized, too abstract, too insulated, it begins to treat communities as variables. The Church's insistence on subsidiarity is, in part, an insistence on the visibility of persons: on the reality that policies are not ideas but pressures placed upon bodies and homes. When communities—like Greenlanders hearing their island discussed as an asset—feel "invisible," what they are naming is precisely the violation subsidiarity exists to prevent.

Now, to be Catholic in a pluralistic society is also to recognize that not everyone speaks your language, and not everyone will accept your premises. Many will not understand "natural law." Many will not accept "grace." Many will bristle at any mention of the Holy Spirit. But public reason does not require silence. It requires translation.

The Church has always known how to do this—not by diluting truth into vagueness, but by speaking about the human person in terms that the conscience can hear even when the creed is not shared. This is why Catholic social teaching can stand beside Protestants, Orthodox, Jews, Muslims, and even pagans of goodwill without surrendering its spine. The lowest common denominator is not a watered-down relativism. It is the irreducible claim that the human person is not a means.

In practice, this means something very specific for Catholics who feel the air tightening: our task is not to become a partisan machine. We must remain a human being and help others remain human. Our task is to refuse lies that make cruelty easy. We must refuse the seductive comfort of nihilism, which is merely despair with better vocabulary. We must efuse the false neutrality that hides behind "I don't know what to believe" when moral reality is visible enough to require a response.

Yet this response must remain proportionate. We do not answer coercion by becoming coercive. We do not answer propaganda by inventing our own propaganda. We do not answer contempt by becoming contemptuous. We do not answer lawlessness by romanticizing lawlessness.Christian witness has a particular character: it binds itself to truth even when truth does not win quickly; it binds itself to the dignity of the other even when the other is cruel; it binds itself to reality even when reality is punished.

This is why the Church's posture, at her best, is neither utopian nor nihilistic. It is not utopian because it understands sin. It is not nihilistic because it understands grace. It expects betrayal, but it does not worship betrayal as inevitability. It expects corruption, but it does not bow to corruption as destiny. It expects conflict, but it refuses to make conflict into a god.

When I read about clergy kneeling in prayer on cold pavement and being zip-tied and carried away, I do not first ask whether their tactics were "effective." Effectiveness is a managerial category; sometimes it is useful, but it is not ultimate. I ask what such actions mean in the moral imagination of the nation: whether they remind ordinary people that conscience is not obsolete; whether they make visible the vulnerable; whether they place bodies between the machinery of the state and those most likely to be crushed by it. That is what Bishop Rob Hirschfeld in New Hampshire was naming, in his own way, when he spoke of bodily witness.

This is also why the warning from Archbishop Broglio matters: because it addresses the great modern temptation, especially in uniform, to treat obedience as a substitute for morality. A soldier, a marine, a sailor, a police officer—each can be placed into situations where the institution demands action while conscience protests. Broglio's remark that disobedience can be morally acceptable when orders violate conscience is not an invitation to chaos; it is an insistence that *the human person is not abolished by the chain of command.*

If you want to know what this looks like at the smallest scale, consider again those Catholics in Nuuk—Filipino immigrants praying rosaries, gathering after Mass for coffee, feeling "quiet concern" rather than panic, asking not for attention but for respect and prayer. The world speaks about their home as a strategy. The Church speaks about their home as a place where persons live. That difference is not small. It is the difference between empire and human reality. It is subsidiarity and solidarity expressed in the simple insistence that Greenland is not an idea; it is a home for humans.

All of this returns, finally, to the interior task each of us must face when the atmosphere turns adversarial: to decide whom you will serve. You do not have to be perfect. You do not have to be loud. You do not have to be reckless. But you do have to be faithful—faithful to the truth, faithful to the dignity of the person, faithful to the limits God places upon power, faithful to the Church's long memory of what happens when fear becomes policy and coercion becomes routine.

I am writing this as someone who yearns for the company of the faithful who stand publicly, shoulder to shoulder, in visible resistance to the machinery of terror. There is a part of me that wants to kneel on cold pavement with the clergy, to sing and pray where the cameras are, to place my own body into the visible line of witness. But I cannot pretend that such participation is safe for me now. Prudence, too, is a virtue, and proportionality applies not only to states but to the lives of persons. There are seasons when one is called to stand in public, and seasons when one is called to stand in hidden fidelity—writing, documenting, refusing lies, sustaining courage in others, and bearing witness in the manner one can endure.

The point, in either season, is not performance. It is alignment. It is to live so that when power asks for your silence, you do not give it; when fear asks for your compromise, you do not offer it; when institutions wobble, you do not outsource your conscience to their instability; and when the vulnerable are treated as expendable, you do not pretend it has nothing to do with you.

The Church's social doctrine, in the end, is not a program to "fix" history. It is a discipline for remaining human inside history—until history, by God's mercy, is gathered into something more than the empires of dust.

IV. The New Era of Christian Witness

I write this section to Catholics first—not because I believe we are morally superior to anyone else, but because we have been entrusted with a particular discipline of truth: confession before accusation, examination before proclamation, prayer before strategy, and mercy without surrender. We are taught, by habit and by sacrament, that the tongue can murder. We are also taught that silence can murder, too—by omission, by cowardice, by the slow outsourcing of conscience to "the way things are." In a time when public life has become a contest of narratives and loyalties, the Church's task is older and simpler: *to bear witness*.

Witness is not verdict, vengeance, nor the intoxication of being right. Witness is the careful, stubborn act of *keeping reality from being erased*. In my own life, this has become more than a spiritual metaphor. It has become an operational necessity.

There is a temptation—especially when institutions fail, when crimes are mocked by procedure—to seize the role of judge in one's own case. I understand that temptation intimately. I have lived what it means to be treated as a problem to be managed rather than a person to be heard. I have watched systems hide behind semantics, not because they are confused, but because they are cornered. I have watched the machinery attempt the oldest trick in the book: don't confront the crimes—disqualify the witness.

But the Christian cannot live by that temptation. We are not allowed to let justified rage become a counterfeit god. Augustine understood that even when the earthly city is disordered, the remedy is not to become disordered in imitation. The remedy is to become more lucid, more disciplined, more truthful—precisely because the world is lying.

So I speak here as a witness—not as a court, a mob, or an inquisitor. I want facts to be faced, crimes to be prosecuted by lawful authority, and the innocent to be protected. But I will not pretend that my anger—however understandable—licenses me to become the thing I oppose. That is why the work I have undertaken through the Northern Kentucky Truth & Accountability Project is built around preservation, not performance; documentation, not spectacle; and evidence, not myth.

The Northern Kentucky Truth & Accountability Project is not a brand. It is not a posture. It is a response to a condition: the breakdown of shared reality, and the use of institutions—legal, social, reputational—as instruments to crush witnesses rather than confront facts.

In my writing, I have described the root of renewal as shared reality: "truth…built from facts, verified through reason, tested by evidence, and refined through dialogue." That is

not a rhetorical flourish. It is the only foundation sturdy enough to rebuild anything when trust is gone. When "the state cannot cohabit with the truth," I wrote, it is "already dead in spirit and soon in letter."

My work, then, is a form of civic and moral triage, rooted in the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas and the praxis of Catholics such as Václav Benda and George Ratterman. It means gathering records, building timelines, documenting patterns across cases, protecting sources and witnesses from retaliation, routing evidence to appropriate authorities, and building an archive so that "history cannot say it did not know" in the event of abdication by legally-mandated actors.

This is why I have described my stance in blunt terms: "I speak not for approval, but for the record." The record is what outlasts intimidation. The record is what outlasts propaganda. The record is what future prosecutors, journalists, and historians can touch. In a culture of cultivated amnesia, touching reality is already an act of resistance.

To preserve evidence is not merely a legal tactic; it is a work of mercy in an age of gaslighting. One of the quietest forms of cruelty is to force victims to prove their own reality while institutions pretend not to see. Evidence preservation is the refusal to collaborate with that cruelty. It is also, in Christian terms, a refusal to let the world's lies colonize the mind.

Practically, this means building redundant archives; maintaining chain-of-custody documentation; storing materials securely; keeping communications and corroborations; and recording patterns with dates, names, and sources. This ensures that reality cannot be dissolved into rumor.

Spiritually, evidence preservation is something else: it is an act of fidelity to the commandment against bearing false witness. Many people interpret that commandment as merely "don't lie." Its deeper meaning is: *do not participate in the social murder of truth*. Do not help the powerful erase what they have done. Do not help the crowd confuse silence with peace. There are seasons when the only righteous act left is to keep the lamp lit.

If evidence is the spine of accountability, witness protection is its heart. Where institutions are compromised, witnesses become targets. The goal is always the same: isolate, exhaust, discredit. I have seen this pattern up close, in ways that cannot be reduced to abstraction.

In one account of our work, I described how colleagues faced retaliation: anonymous threats; a denied protective order; then a counter-order mailed not only to a partner's parents but to their employer—an act designed to intimidate through reputational and economic pressure.

This is why I am careful, and why I urge people who read this to be careful too. Courage is not recklessness. Prudence is not cowardice. Augustine would call prudence one of the basic virtues of ordered love: loving the right things in the right way, at the right time, for the right reasons.

To protect witnesses is to practice mercy toward the vulnerable—and to practice strategic intelligence toward the adversary. It means, specifically, to minimize unnecessary exposure, anonymize and compartmentalize sensitive details, secure communications, and understand that retaliation often arrives through "respectable" channels (paperwork, complaints, HR pressure, insinuation). We must also resist the urge to treat every witness like a hero who must "go public." Not everyone is called to martyrdom, but those who are do not choose it for drama—they accept it because they cannot deny Christ. The duty of a truth movement is not to burn its own people as fuel. The duty is to *keep them alive*.

The Church has a long memory of commissions, inquiries, letters, and testimonies. Not all truth arrives as lightning; much of it arrives as patient accumulation. The saint is often the person who refuses to let reality be diluted by fatigue. This is why I have argued for organized, structured fact-finding—what I have called, in my own framework, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission function: gathering testimony, unearthing documents, interviewing residents and officials, building a public account that cannot be brushed aside.

I have also emphasized building networks—legal, journalistic, activist—because lone individuals are easily crushed, while organized truth is harder to bury. The work is meant to be *collective*, not because crowds are wise, but because reality is heavy, and no single person should have to carry it alone.

This is also where people of faith can contribute in ways that do not require ideological uniformity. Fact-finding is not partisan. Evidence is not Republican or Democrat. Witness testimony is not "left" or "right." The command to love your neighbor includes refusing to abandon them to a lie.

Support, then, can be concrete: legal aid for witnesses, secure storage and documentation support, introductions to reputable journalists and investigators, trauma-informed pastoral accompaniment, material assistance for families facing retaliation, and disciplined amplification of verified information.

If you want to help the truth, help it become *legible*—and help the vulnerable remain *safe enough to speak*. We should always pledge solidarity with those who live within the truth, and here I will be plain: I pledge my full support—without qualification whatsoever—to all who live in truth.

To be sure, Catholics do not invent witness; we inherit it. The Fathers wrote in a world where the “city” often demanded lies as the price of belonging. Augustine did not ask the Church to become an empire. He asked Christians to become a people whose loves are ordered toward God, so that no regime can purchase their conscience. He taught that earthly power is real, but not ultimate; and that the Church’s integrity is measured not by proximity to authority, but by fidelity to truth.

The martyrs teach the same lesson without footnotes. They did not die because they loved conflict. They died because they refused to say what was false. They refused the small lie that would have purchased comfort. That refusal is the seed of every true reform. In more ordinary form, the saints teach something equally important: patience with the slow work of God. Evidence accumulation is slow. Institutional accountability is slow. Healing is slow. But slow does not mean weak. Slow can be inexorable.

I have written that “truth is immortal” and that “empires that deny it are not.” That is, in its own way, an Augustinian claim: the City of God cannot be destroyed by administrative denial letters, because it is built on something deeper than bureaucracy.

Yet Augustine would also warn me here: to beware the pride that confuses one’s own labor with the Kingdom of God itself. I am not writing to canonize myself, nor to claim authority beyond my station. I write instead to invite my fellow believers into a discipline that has sustained the Church across centuries of trial: to keep the record; to protect the vulnerable; to support the patient search for truth; to refuse the lie; and to resist the intoxication of righteous rage. I pledge my support simply as a follower of Christ and a member of His Church—built not by our generation alone, but by ancestors who bore witness under pressures that should sober and instruct our practice today.

V. Why We Choose Hope

I want to close with hope, because hope is among the most misunderstood—and most urgently needed—social teachings of the Church.

Hope is not optimism. It is not the expectation that circumstances will improve on their own, nor the comforting belief that history inevitably bends toward justice. Hope is something sterner and more disciplined. As I have written elsewhere, hope is defiance in the face of despair: the quiet conviction that even when the world appears to burn, the conditions for renewal have not been extinguished, that something essential remains alive beneath the ash.

To remain in hope is not to minimize the gravity of our moment. It is to understand it accurately. The Church does not ask us to pretend that collapse is impossible or that suffering is an illusion. She asks us to remember that collapse is not new, that suffering has always been the context in which truth proves itself, and that history is not exhausted by the imagination of any one generation.

The symbol of our faith—the cross—is instructive here. In the ancient world, symbols were not abstractions; they were instruments. The cross functioned as a technology of meaning. It taught populations what was permitted, what was forbidden, and what awaited those who crossed lines. Its power did not lie in death itself—Rome killed efficiently in many ways—but in the message impressed upon the collective psyche: dissent ends here, stripped of dignity, memory, and honor.

By placing Jesus on the cross, Rome sought to fix his meaning permanently as a criminal. The cross was meant to resolve ambiguity, to close the question. Yet the symbol did not remain stable. Instead of sealing meaning, it fractured it. The cross did not settle the moral question; it exposed it. In attempting to render Jesus futile, Rome made him enduring. What was designed to end interpretation became the site of inexhaustible interpretation.

This is why the cross endures. It is not because suffering is redemptive in itself, but because the cross marks the precise moment where power attempts to monopolize meaning—and fails. It stands as a reminder that symbols imposed by force are unstable, and that when authority overreaches, it reveals rather than resolves the moral structure of the world.

We are called to remain in hope because our community has already faced everything we are now tempted to believe is unprecedented. The early Church did not arise in a world of peace or moral clarity. She emerged in a civilization that was administratively sophisticated yet spiritually hollow—capable of law and order, but unable to restrain

power when power became afraid. Christianity did not succeed because it seized control, but because it preserved a truthful account of the human person when other accounts collapsed.

The Church learned early that not all threats come from outside. Some arrive disguised as enlightenment, offering counterfeit hope. Gnostic movements promised escape from the world rather than fidelity to it. Pelagian confidence promised moral perfection without grace. Manichean cosmologies elevated evil into an equal and eternal force. Each of these responses made sense in moments of fear. Each was rejected not merely on doctrinal grounds, but because it failed to describe reality as it is.

The Church's answers were not strategies of domination, but of patience. Against Gnosticism, she affirmed the Incarnation: God did not abandon the world; He entered it. Against Pelagianism, she affirmed grace: human effort alone cannot bear the weight of salvation or meaning. Against Manichean despair, she affirmed that evil is not a rival power but a privation—experientially real, highly destructive, but ultimately unstable.

These were not abstract victories. They were lived truths, refined under pressure. The modern world, for all its achievements, is again discovering the limits of reason without grace, procedure without moral substance, and power without restraint. This recognition is not confined to believers, nor does it require ideological uniformity. It appears wherever people sense that systems sustained by pretense cannot endure indefinitely, and that truth, to remain truth, must be lived.

Christians need not greet this moment with either triumphalism or withdrawal. Hope does not deny decline; it denies despair. It does not promise that our generation will prevail, or that outcomes will be favorable, or that suffering will be spared. It promises something quieter and more demanding: that truth remains accessible, that meaning is not exhausted, and that fidelity is never wasted.

The Church has endured not because she always possessed power, but because she preserved memory. When institutions fractured, she remembered. When narratives collapsed, she preserved language. When violence erased, she copied, taught, prayed, and waited. She did not replace the world; she accompanied it through its disintegration and renewal.

To say this is not to claim certainty about how the present moment will resolve. It is simply to note that we are not without resources. We possess an inherited grammar for understanding fear, power, suffering, and responsibility. We know how to live without illusions, how to refuse lies without hatred, and how to act without surrendering to despair.

Hope, in this sense, is not a prediction. It is a discipline. If we endure, it will not be because we are strong, but because we remember. Memory, when guarded by hope, is the antidote to fear. The City of God is not an abstraction. It becomes visible whenever the Church refuses to lie, refuses to despair, and refuses to abandon the human person—quietly, imperfectly, and persistently.

We are not at the end of history. We are at another turning. While we cannot know precisely what lies ahead, we do know how to walk: with restraint rather than panic, with fidelity rather than spectacle, and with hope—not because it guarantees victory, but because it preserves meaning.